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Valuing Evaluation: Why Should We Develop an Evaluation Culture?

Martha M. Snyder

Nova Southeastern University, smithmt@nova.edu

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Valuing Evaluation: Why Should We Develop an Evaluation Culture?

Abstract

Evaluation is an important element of any living system. By doing an evaluation, we can systematically review whether a program, service, or event is meeting the needs and goals of a particular individual or group. In *Everyday Evaluation on the Run: The User - Friendly Introductory Guide to Effective Evaluation*, author Yoland Wadsworth introduces the rationale, concepts, procedures, and tools that are needed to reflect on our everyday activities and develop a culture of evaluation. Her approachable style and practical advice will appeal to many who are interested in learning how to improve the value they offer in their organizations.

Keywords

Evaluation, Evaluation Culture, Microcosm Evaluation

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Valuing Evaluation: Why Should We Develop an Evaluation Culture?

Martha Snyder

Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

*Evaluation is an important element of any living system. By doing an evaluation, we can systematically review whether a program, service, or event is meeting the needs and goals of a particular individual or group. In *Everyday Evaluation on the Run: The User-Friendly Introductory Guide to Effective Evaluation*, author Yoland Wadsworth introduces the rationale, concepts, procedures, and tools that are needed to reflect on our everyday activities and develop a culture of evaluation. Her approachable style and practical advice will appeal to many who are interested in learning how to improve the value they offer in their organizations. Keywords: Evaluation, Evaluation Culture, Microcosm Evaluation*

Background

It seems that everywhere I turn these days, whether it be in the literature, in the news, in the office, or in my community, I am reading and hearing about the importance of evaluation or the results of an evaluation and its impact. Is this why Wadsworth wrote a book about everyday evaluation? Does the term everyday evaluation mean that evaluation practices are an expected part of every organization or does it refer to the notion that we live in a world where value is something we intentionally seek out? In the Preface, Wadsworth mentions that where evaluation was not considered a must have in professional practice ten years ago, it is now considered an expected practice in many professions.

I became curious about what types of companies hire people with evaluation skills so I did a quick search on Indeed.com (www.indeed.com), a popular meta-search engine for job postings. Simply by typing the word “evaluator” in the search window resulted in 1,551 job listings. These jobs spanned business and industry, higher education, military, government, and healthcare. Position titles included: program evaluator, training evaluator, credential evaluator, clinical site evaluator, medical evaluator, flight evaluator, consultant, research and evaluation associate, and systems evaluator to name a few. Regardless of whether we have the word “evaluator” or “evaluation” in our title, if we are in a human service profession, it is likely at some point in our careers that we will be asked to perform evaluative functions – both formal and informal.

Wadsworth’s book, *Everyday Evaluation on the Run: The User-Friendly Introductory Guide to Effective Evaluation*, caught my eye because of its title. I was interested in Wadsworth’s notion of doing evaluation *on the run* and I am always happy to read something that promotes a *user-friendly* approach. As I began reading, I became intrigued by Wadsworth’s explanation of an evaluation culture. To me, this idea made sense. That is, the practice of building in this reflective process as part of our day-to-day activities. I approached this book review through the lens of a qualitative researcher (Chenail, 2010) and as such, I formulated the following survey or grand tour question (Fetterman, 2009): *What contribution does this book make to the development of a culture of evaluation?*

The review is organized as follows: First, I describe the purpose of the book and the intended audience. Next, I describe the overall structure of the book and discuss its contents

including the strengths and drawback. Finally, I share my recommendations and concluding thoughts.

Purpose and Target Audience

This book serves as a guide for conducting evaluation, particularly in the human service sector. In a simple, clear, and straight-forward way, Wadsworth describes a conceptual framework she refers to as the “action evaluation research process” that aids in organizing evaluation projects; walks readers through two approaches to evaluation – open inquiry and audit review; provides strategies and examples that are helpful for doing evaluation; and shares practical tips and tools that should be a part of every evaluator’s toolbox.

Described as “a user-friendly introductory guide,” (title) the primary audience is not the professional who conducts large-scale evaluations but rather those of us who are interested in developing a reflective mindset and applying strategies to our daily activities that will help us evaluate. It is a book for beginners - those who, perhaps have been asked to conduct an evaluation at their workplace or who are students who are learning about evaluation as part of their program curriculum.

Structure and Content

Before the five chapters of content, Wadsworth primes the reader with the following front matter: a forward to the first edition, guide to contents, list of guides, diagrams and tables, preface of the first edition, preface to the current edition, and acknowledgements. The book has five chapters including:

- Chapter 1: Introduction
- Chapter 2: A Conceptual Framework
- Chapter 3: Two Approaches to Evaluation
- Chapter 4: Doing Evaluation
- Chapter 5: The Evaluation Industry’s Toolbox

In chapter 1, Wadsworth defines evaluation and explains how we actually do evaluation in our everyday lives even though we may not realize it. She offers a simple example of a “microcosm evaluation” (p. 8) of a coffee cup that illuminates the basic cycle of evaluation. By presenting this very basic example to which most everyone can relate, Wadsworth primes the pump for the exploration of the evaluative research cycle that is presented in chapter 2.

In chapter 2, Wadsworth reveals a conceptual framework she calls, the “evaluative research cycle” (p. 15). This cycle includes the following phases:

- reflection (noticing the discrepancy)
- design (planning to evaluate),
- fieldwork and interpretation,
- feedback, analysis, reflection, synthesis, and drawing conclusions, and
- planning and putting into practice.

In addition to the description provided in the chapter, a handy wall chart is also available for download from the original publisher’s web site, Allen & Unwin, at: <https://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=94&book=9781742370439>. If one plans to use the wall chart, however, I suggest enlarging it as the font is too small to read when printed on 8 ½ x 11 paper. Also, the organization of this chapter in terms of its headings and

subheadings was a bit confusing. For example, it would have been helpful to use the same labels presented in the action evaluation research process wall map as major headings in the book. In some cases, the chapter headings and subheadings did not match. These issues could easily be resolved during the editing process of an updated edition.

In chapter 3, two approaches to evaluation are explained: open inquiry and audit review. There are many different reasons why people conduct evaluations and there are typically two types of audiences that request these evaluations – the local (i.e., the doers) and central audiences (i.e., the funders). The local audience needs to know how well a service or activity is meeting the needs of the stakeholders so that they can make changes or adjustments as needed while the central audience needs to know what is happening in order to justify, for example, the spending of public funds.

Wadsworth suggests that the central audiences have used the audit type evaluation and local audiences have more use for an inquiry type audit. That is, as a way to ensure that “funds are being used for the purposes for which they were provided” (p. 56). However, she has noticed that in some instances, these two types of evaluations (i.e., audit and inquiry) are being seen less as two types of separate evaluations and more as two parts of an “action evaluation process” (p. 56). Furthermore, not only should the processes of “looking back” (i.e., audit) and “looking forward” (i.e., inquiry) be integrated but those who are requesting these types of evaluations – the local and central audiences – should work together so they can reap the benefits of an integrated evaluation approach. Wadsworth explains how these two approaches to evaluation can be integrated. Some useful diagrams and flowcharts are presented in this chapter that can be used to guide novice evaluators through a series of questions that will help them use and integrate these two approaches.

After priming the reader with the fundamentals of evaluation, Wadsworth offers a practical approach to doing evaluation in chapter 4. What I appreciate most from this chapter are the examples of activities that can be done to develop a culture of evaluation. Such activities include daily informal personal reflection, weekly reviews, monthly collective issue-pooling sessions, etc. Collectively, these activities can form the basis of a comprehensive evaluation. There are also many examples offered to demonstrate these activities including basic everyday events such as how to evaluate a group-work class or series of workshops and how to evaluate campaigns and newsletters to things to consider when self-evaluating a funding program.

Chapter 5 includes a variety of evaluation models, methods and techniques, and paradigms we can consider as we engage in our evaluation activities. Wadsworth presents this chapter in an organized way and also offers some guiding questions that we can use to determine the best models, approaches, and paradigms to suit our unique evaluation opportunities. While Wadsworth provides a practical approach to conducting evaluation including the big picture process along with applicable tips and techniques, most of the examples come from the context of human service (or human systems) in Australia. It might be helpful to provide more global examples from a variety of contexts.

Recommendations

Wadsworth admits, “For most of us, everyday evaluation won’t be done regularly ‘on the run’ unless we are able to change the initial value we place on spending all of our time doing rather than setting aside some of our time for thinking about the value of what we are doing” (p. 5). That is, each of us can become better producers of value to our customers if we are able to reflect on our everyday activities. Wadsworth lays the groundwork for us to do just that – think about how we are providing value and apply strategies to capture where we are on target or are missing the mark. Wadsworth helps readers develop a culture of

evaluation by providing simple, practical, and useful guidance and techniques that anyone can apply to find the value in the programs, services, and events of which they contribute.

So whether you are an evaluation professional or simply someone who is interested reflecting on your practice to identify ways it can be improved, this book provides helpful and practical processes, procedures, and techniques that you can implement to evaluate the value of the human activities with which you are engaged. Wadsworth has informed my practice of evaluation and enlightened me to this idea of an evaluation culture – a culture where we learn to seek out the value in our everyday lives.

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Author Note

Martha (Marti) Snyder, Ph.D. is an associate professor in the Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences (GSCIS) at Nova Southeastern University (NSU). Her research focuses on designs for learning in technology-enhanced environments. She may be contacted at smithmt@nova.edu.

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